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ABSTRACT

Big Cypress Seminole Indian Reservation in Florida was the site for this field research intended (1) to investigate the elements of present-day cultural practices which impede the educational development of the children and (2) to gauge the impact of the Federal day school in preparing Indian children for the transition to public schooling. The study was also directed at those areas in which special services were needed to improve the school program. Methodology employed in the study was that of the participant observer in the Indian community. The target area for this study was the Ahfachkee Elementary Day School, established in 1940 by the Bureau of Indian Affairs as a thatched roof hut and now replaced by a well-equipped, air-conditioned, 2-classroom structure with an enrollment of 40 (1968-69) and 2 teachers and a teacher aide. The study points out the personalized atmosphere the Federal day school provides for the children, which results in high attendance but is contrasted by the high dropout rate when they transfer to the public school in Clewiston as they enter the fifth grade. A typical day at Ahfachkee is described, and evaluative remarks are made of the academic program. The educational future of Seminoles on Big Cypress is also discussed. (EL)

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THE FEDERAL DAY SCHOOL AS AN ACCULTURATIONAL AGENT FOR SEMINOLE INDIAN CHILDREN

by Harry A. Kersey, Jr.

This paper is the report of a field research conducted throughout the 1968-69 school year at the Big Cypress Seminole Indian Reservation in Florida. The objective of the study was to ascertain those elements of contemporary reservation culture which impeded the educational development of the children, and to gauge the impact of the federal day school in preparing Indian children for the transition to public schooling. A secondary focus was to pinpoint those areas in which special services were needed to make the school program more effective. The basic methodology employed was that of participant observer in the educational and social life of the Indian community.

THE RESERVATION SETTING

The Big Cypress Seminole Indian reservation sits in solitary isolation on the edge of the Florida Everglades. Even today this 42,000 acre preserve of marginal swamp land and pine barrens can be reached by only two routes. Because of their physical isolation and traditional apathy toward accepting new ways, the approximately three hundred Indians who live on Big Cypress are the least acculturated members of their tribe. The other Seminoles occupy a large rural reservation north of Lake Okeechobee, and a small urban reservation on the outskirts of Fort Lauderdale; both of these sites present unique adaptations to the surrounding dominant culture which are rightfully the subject of other studies and cannot be treated here. Suffice it to say that neither of the other reservations has

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been faced with such overwhelming problems of transportation and communication to impede their cultural contacts.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs has operated an elementary day school on the Big Cypress reservation since 1940. The original school was a thatched roof hut. In 1966 the old school was replaced with a modern facility that is air conditioned, has two well equipped classrooms, teacher's office, instructional TV, a kitchen and serving facility, as well as shower rooms. It was named Ahfachkee or "Happy" in Seminole.

At the time of this study the school consisted of four grades taught by a husband-wife team, both of whom are well qualified teachers --but not specifically trained to work with Indians or other deprived children. They were assisted by a bilingual Indian teacher-aide who acted as an interpreter for the beginning students who came with minimum English fluency. In 1966 a Head Start center was established on the reservation to prepare students for the transition from chickee to classroom; however, due to a lack of trained personnel to run the center it has failed in this vital task, and most children arrive at the school with minimal educational skills. Because of this the teacher who would normally teach the first and second grades has restructured her program to encompass many activities that would normally be found in a kindergarten. There were twenty children in the "beginners" classroom with one teacher and the teacher-aide; this left her husband with twenty students ranging in age from 8 to 13 in grades two through four.

The enrollment at Ahfachkee throughout most of the 1968-69 school year was forty pupils: twenty-seven boys and thirteen girls. Surprisingly, the attendance averaged 93% for a 180 day school year.[1]

1. Annual Attendance Report, Ahfachkee Day School, July 7, 1969. Seminole Indian Agency Files.

There are a number of reasons for this consistent attendance which are not attributable to parental interest in education per se. Perhaps most important is the fact that the school provides both breakfast and lunch for the children. For many of them it is the sole source of balanced nourishment during the day. Another factor which may account for the regular attendance is that the school with its clean, well lighted rooms, abundant creative and recreational materials, television set, indoor plumbing, and sympathetic staff provides a striking contrast to the home life of most Seminole children. A third element contributing to high attendance is the practice of the teachers in visiting the homes of those children who are absent each day to see if they cannot be induced to come to school.

The ideal environment which the school has endeavored to create for the children is predicated on the obvious fact that their emotional and physical needs have to be met before there can be any educational progress. To the extent that the school has achieved this goal it has set a precedent that a larger, more impersonalized institution like the public school cannot match. Thus, when the Seminole children who are used to a very informal personal relationship with teachers and peers are transferred into a public school setting, they have great difficulty in adjusting to their new role expectations. Many never do adjust and quietly leave before completing junior high school. In 1968 the BIA reported a 67% dropout rate among Seminole students.[2]

When Big Cypress children enter the fifth grade they are required to board a county school bus which originates on the reservation at 7 a.m., then spend the better part of an hour and a half traveling the forty-five miles to Clewiston. This round trip of

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2. E. W. Barrett, Superintendent Seminole Indian Agency to U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Indian Education, Jan. 21, 1969. Seminole Indian Agency Files.

ninety miles each day is enough to dishearten any child, especially if he has risen before dawn, probably has not eaten breakfast, and isn't too enthusiastic about going into the hostile environment of the public school. The Indian students have not been fully assimilated into the life of the public schools; most remain shy and withdrawn around other children and rarely participate in after school activities because of the bus ride. Most of the Indian children are not prepared to compete in school and generally perform several grade levels below their classmates. Under such conditions it is understandable that so very few Seminole youths complete their education. There was not a high school graduate from Big Cypress until 1963, and only eleven have graduated from public or federal boarding schools since that time.[3] As a result, the overall educational level of the Big Cypress people is much lower than on the other reservations. Many of the parents are functional illiterates and some have never attended school at all; those who reached high school are a small minority. Furthermore, the parents for the most part are apathetic about their children's schooling, and this makes the task of the teachers at Ahfachkee a seemingly insurmountable one.

A TYPICAL SCHOOL DAY

The typical school day at Ahfachkee would horrify most teachers and administrators who have a penchant for orderliness. Rarely does the educational program conform to a rigid schedule; even the time for opening exercises is flexible. Every aspect of the school day is

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3. During the 1968-69 school year there were forty-eight Seminole Indian students attending federal boarding schools. These children, ranging in age from nine to eighteen, came from home environments which were not conducive to their educational and social well being as determined by tribal leaders and BIA social workers. Of this group twenty-three came from the Big Cypress Reservation.

a response to the physical and psychological needs of Indian children while preparing them both socially and intellectually for the ultimate transition to public school. The account presented here is a reconstruction based upon many months of observing the school in operation, and while each event did not take place daily to be sure, they did occur with enough frequency to be considered a part of the school routine.

Morning comes early to the children of Big Cypress. The older students who must catch the bus for Clewiston are served breakfast at the day school at 6:30 a.m.--if they come. By seven o'clock the first elementary schoolers have arrived for their meal. This is eaten from trays taken into the classroom while watching a morning kiddie show from Miami on the television receiver. The teachers have estimated, perhaps pessimistically, that attendance would be halved were it not for the dual attraction of the meal and television. Following breakfast the children are sent out to play while the classroom is cleaned and put in order for the day's activities.

Shortly after the children go out to play the teachers and teacher aide arrive to plan the day's program. When they feel that it is time to begin, usually after most of the children have returned to the building of their own volition, the bell is rung to call in the remainder of the students. Following the pledge of allegiance, the aide checks roll and reports absentees to the teachers. At this time the male teacher takes a government vehicle and goes to round up those absentees whom he suspects are not missing due to illness or other legitimate cause. The Seminoles are not subject to state compulsory attendance laws as they live on federal land; the only pressure exerted on parents to send their children to school is community opinion and the urging of the tribal and BIA officials. The teacher has no authority to make the children attend school, so he depends

upon reasoning with the recalcitrant parents or cajoling them into letting the children attend. In most cases this extra effort on his part has kept the child in school and the average attendance figure high.

When the staff is sure that all the children who will be coming that day are present the instruction begins. Sometimes this is as late as ten o'clock, for it often takes that long to get organized after the "truant officer" returns with his haul of absentees. They along with the other students are given a cursory examination for personal hygiene, grooming, and apparent illness such as coughing or open sores; problem cases are sent to the public health clinic on Wednesday and Friday mornings. At the beginning of the school year the children are required to wear shoes; if they come to school without any, a pair is provided from a supply of clothing kept on hand for such purposes--and often replenished out of the teacher's pocket. Actually, no child should ever be forced to miss school because of a lack of adequate clothing as BIA welfare funds are available for such purposes. Often, however, the children attend in ragged clothes that may have been new at the beginning of the year but are about to disintegrate from a combination of constant hard use and little care. In most Indian dwellings there are neither closets nor chests of drawers, so clothing and other personal belongings are kept in open cardboard cartons on the floor. Because most Indian children are unkempt through no fault of their own, personal hygiene and grooming are emphasized throughout the school day; the children wash before meals, brush their teeth after meals, are taught table manners and the use of silverware, napkins, etc.--things they rarely ever encounter at home but will be expected to know at school. Perhaps the most graphic aspect of this health care is the weekly bath session at the school. Because so few Big Cypress homes have indoor plumbing many

children seldom bathe, so one day each week every child receives a shower whether he needs it or not! Delousing, shampooing, and furthur physical inspection are standard procedure during these sessions. The teacher who is left in charge of the classrooms on these mornings can do little more than keep order as the children are so excited in anticipation of their turn.

Throughout the remainder of the week classes run uninterrupted until noon, except for a brief juice break and recess period. Emphasis is placed on standard elementary school subjects. Following the midday meal there is another half hour recess period. Classes resume from one to three o'clock for the upper grades, while the beginners are taken home in a government vehicle at two-thirty. The main purpose of this delivery service is simply to assure that the very young children actually get home. In the past there have been cases of children wandering off and not being located until late at night, or being attacked by older children. Even with this portal to portal transportation many youngsters return to homes where there are no adults to supervise them until the parents return from work. The same situation exists for many of the older children as well, so they remain around the school and playground until late in the afternoon. Thus, from 7 a.m. until about 5 p.m. the Ahfachkee Day School is the focal point in the life of most youngsters on the Big Cypress reservation. As such it has assumed the role of the prime acculturational agency in preparing these children to cope with the dominant culture outside the reservation. It has a greater positive impact on their lives than the home, church, or other social institutions; yet, the degree of success which it can achieve will depend upon the support of these other institutions in the future.

From this account it is apparent that the day school has con-

centrated on the personal services required by the children, often to the detriment of the academic program. Yet, without these vital services there is little likelihood that many children would even be in school, much less be receptive to learning. A vicious cycle is thereby perpetuated: the more time devoted to personal services, the less there is for instruction. Moreover, there is some question about the effectiveness of the methods and materials employed at the day school. The curriculum is middle class oriented and does not have a great deal of relevance for Seminole children. The reading materials provide a good example of this; many books feature the typical suburban family or are racially integrated texts about city life. Even those readers featuring stories about Indians are foreign to them, for the Seminole identifies no more with a Navajo in the southwest than he does with suburbanites or Negro children in the city. They have little interest in reading and their language arts skills are poor; as a result they often score several levels below grade on standardized achievement tests when they enter public schools.

There are numerous special educational techniques which can be used with deprived children; however, the day school teachers, while dedicated to their work, are products of conventional teacher education and by their own admission have no training in special education. To further complicate the picture the teachers had no valid information on their charges at the beginning of the school year. There had never been a formal testing program at Ahfachkee, so the teachers were forced to make their own assessment of student abilities; cumulative records carried little useful information, and some children did not even know what grade they were in the year before! The teachers would welcome professional assistance in restructuring the curriculum to make it more responsive to the needs of Indian children.

FUTURE OF THE DAY SCHOOL

Despite the shortcomings of the Ahfachkee Day School it will continue to operate and its program will probably be expanded to include both a kindergarten and two additional grades. This course is dictated by the isolation of the reservation and the lack of success which Seminole children have shown in the public schools. Future programs will concentrate on improving the quality of the educational program at Big Cypress. However, there is still a division of opinion among local educators, BIA officials, and tribal members over the best plan of action. Some want the children placed in public schools from the beginning and phase out the all-Indian school; others favor beefing up the program at the day school and sending a more mature, better prepared student to off-reservation schooling; a third group feels that the Seminole should be left alone and not be made to go to school at all.

Advocates of the third position, mainly non-Indians, would have it appear that this is just another instance of government interference in the lives of people, in this case forcing education on a people who never wanted or needed it in their way of life. Many critics have, in fact, asked: "Why not leave them alone to continue their way of life?" While the life style of the people on Big Cypress is still in a fairly primitive state, it has changed rapidly in the last decade and this process will continue to accelerate. Whether the Seminole parent appreciates the need for his child to receive an education or not, the fact remains that education is the key to their survival in the world that is rapidly absorbing their formerly secluded domain. More and more the Indian will be forced to compete in a society where he is not regarded as an interesting anachronism, and will be expected to make his own way. The day will inevitably come when the reservation is no longer a safe haven; when the Everglades

are consumed by farms, ranches, tourist parks, supersonic jetports, and crisscrossed by turnpikes; when the unskilled agricultural jobs dwindle under the impact of technology; when the federal government settles the land claims of the Seminole Tribe and ultimately sets them on their own. Then the Indian must be ready to adapt to a new way of life. Thus the work of the day school and its teachers is crucial to the future of these people; by developing healthy, intelligent youngsters they are providing a foundation for orderly social change and the leaders who can affect it.

Clearly, if the day school is to effectively fulfill its role certain programs of remedial and compensatory education, as well as more substantive community involvement, must be instituted through the efforts of BIA and the tribal leaders. In the fall of 1968 Florida Atlantic University began an adult basic literacy program on Big Cypress aimed at the illiterate parents of pre- and school aged children. It was hoped that this would enable them to aid their children or at least provide some reinforcement for the work of the school. In the late spring of 1969 the BIA contracted with the university to carry out a program of psychological and achievement testing, speech and hearing screening, as well as a survey of student living conditions and parental attitudes regarding education. This basic data was crucial for planning future programs. Title I funding is being used to provide in-service teacher education, remedial reading, and tutorial services at the school during the 1969-70 school year. With the advent of proper funding, the involvement of university specialists, and the continuing support of BIA and the tribe, perhaps the future will see substantive changes in the quality of education offered at the Ahfachkee Day School.